

[By Gordon Dritschilo](#)

Debbie Woods said that when her son returned from Iraq with severe injuries, he was one of the lucky ones because he had a family to come home to.

Woods said she stood by her son, a Guardsman who served three tours in Iraq, but that even with her help, navigating the red tape of veterans services was difficult for the returning soldier.

"Copying almost 1,500 pages of medical records has gotten real old," she said.

Enter Brian Perry, part of the Veterans Outreach Team in Rutland County. Woods said Perry helped her navigate the paperwork and understand the military jargon much of it contained. He connected her to organizations that would give her son rides to his various appointments around the Northeast.

"Brian is a savior in our eyes," she said. "(My son) is not living his life 24-7 depressed anymore."

Woods told her story Tuesday at an event at the Rutland Veterans of Foreign Wars post organized by Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., and Rep. Chris Gibson, R-N.Y. Welch and Gibson are looking to use Vermont's Yellow Ribbon Program, which hires veterans to do outreach with returning members of the National Guard, as a national model with \$70 million in funding.

"The obligation that we have, those of us who have benefited from the service of soldiers ... it doesn't begin and end when they're in-theater," Welch said. "It continues when they come home and face the challenge of reintegrating into the community."

Gibson, who served four tours in Iraq, said he became interested in the Vermont program after Welch testified on it to the House Armed Services Committee, where Gibson sits. Gibson said

the military has a lot of programs focusing on the end of a soldier's active duty but much less once they are out.

Andre Wing, who coordinates the program, said he has 12 outreach workers around the state along with a liaison officer with the Department of Veterans Affairs, a program analyst and a team leader. He said he has 522 open cases, some going as far back as 2007, and the program works with issues ranging from financial to behavioral to health.

Welch said the program in Vermont costs \$1.2 million a year and that he is trying to secure \$70 million to take it national — though that would not be enough to launch such programs in every state.

"There's got to be an infrastructure that's ready to do it," Welch said. "This is a start."

Gen. Thomas Drew, deputy adjutant general for Vermont, said the program grew out of a desire to have something in place when Guard members returned from mobilization.

"These are really citizen soldiers who live with their problems in the community," he said. "We didn't really have a way to reach out to them."

Drew said a grant-funded 2006 program to bring services to more remote parts of the state was "less than satisfactory" and that the Guard worked with Vermont's congressional delegation to get Department of Defense funding for the outreach program.

"That was our veterans, under contract, reaching out to other veterans in the state and connecting them to resources ... that would help them correct their problems," he said, adding that the outreach workers stay in touch with the veterans they help throughout the process.

"To get into the VA hospital is a daunting task for a lot of people," said Staff Sgt. Jon Bruce who, like Woods, worked with Perry after coming home wounded. "They need somebody to mentor

them in the door."

Bruce said that civilians sometimes take a "9 to 5" attitude toward such jobs whereas the veterans in the Yellow Ribbon Program tend to take it more seriously.

Veteran David Elie and his wife described reaching the brink of homelessness before being contacted by an outreach coordinator who got them and their three children into housing.

"We have our own space, we have food on the table, we have heat," said Elie's wife, Anne Kephart. "There are veterans out there who are homeless because they don't know, and because they don't know, they can't get help."